DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 957 SO 021 545

AUTHOR Ford, Jo
TITLE Engaging Students through Class Participation.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; *College Instruction; Higher Education; *Humanities Instruction; Learning Activities; Student Educational Objectives; *Student Participation; *Teaching Experience

ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the efforts undertaken to encourage greater participation and engagement from students in a college-level humanities class. Three types of activities were utilized: (1) connected to homework and attempted to focus on assigned readings; (2) attempted to get students to focus on what was happening in the classroom on that particular day; and (3) involved a critical thinking activity pushing students to reflect on how the content connected with their lives. The activities were generally effective in their aims; and test scores and attendance improved as well. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED345957

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH CLASS PARTICIPATION

Jo Ford

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JO FORD

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 021 545

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Engaging Students Through Class Participation

~~PERSONALLY ATTEMPTED INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATION~~

In the past year I have made a concerted attempt to get engagement and participation in my Humanities class. The problem is the students' lack of attention for a variety of reasons, some perplexity as a result of diverse cultural backgrounds and a lack of class preparation as a result of being overextended. If I could successfully address this problem, I would improve their learning, increase their critical thinking and improve attendance. I was prompted to try for more involvement by the critical thinking dogma that if there is no interaction, there is very little retention of information.

Major considerations were to sacrifice a minimal amount of lecture time, to avoid embarrassing non-native speakers who are diffident about their pronunciation, and to avoid a testing mode. The activity of each class period needed to involve all the students, be short and intense, and legitimately connect the students' brains to the class content. Questions must not be a know/don't know type or they would shut out the unprepared.

Activites fell into three categories. One type of activity was connected to homework and attempted to get them to focus on assigned readings. Another type attempted to get students to focus on what was happening in the classroom on that day--to get their immediate attention. And the third type was primarily a critical thinking activity, pushing students to reflect on how the content which was presented connected with their lives or with the insights they brought with them to the class.

Usually these are ten minute exercises about assigned literature. But on days when I have no inspiration, I use more general gimmicks:

put a relevant cartoon on an overhead and ask them to write for five minutes on why it is funny; use colored chalk instead of white and do a lot of iconic notations on the board instead of the usual; ask each student to contribute two items to a set of group notes for absentees; take roll by asking each student to jot down a main idea or a question about the homework; ask for, at the end of the class, a gender-reversed analysis of a character's motives; ask, "Had you lived in this socio-historical period, what would have been your biggest complaint? greatest joy?" The questions were announced at the beginning of the period and answered at the end. Some could begin in class and be finished up in fifteen minutes at home. One objective was to get the underprepared to go back and read the assignment.

My effort succeeded. It was fun for me, and the students loved it. It usually amounted to me asking myself before each class: What ten minute activity can we do in class today to engage the attention of all?

It is surprisingly easy to devise activities based on literature. However, the activity must disregard whether the student has read the work before coming to class. For example, when an excerpt from "The Canterbury Tales" has been assigned, I ask each student to select a pilgrim described in the Prologue. After ten minutes of study each must introduce himself or herself to the rest of the pilgrims. For "Everyman" we read aloud. from a translation that is semi-medieval. No one is embarrassed to read because it is awkward reading for all. We seldom finish in one class, but the reluctant readers have been launched into it and are apt to go home and finish it.

Examples of activities which begin in class and can be finished at

home may be seen in working with Old and New Testament literature. After establishing structural patterns in the wisdom literature, I ask them to bring to the next class some of their own "wisdom" using the patterns explained in the lecture. After establishing the genre and the teachings of some NT parables, I ask them to read a very ambiguous one and give me a brief interpretation of their own which would be consistent with the teachings covered in class.

For critical thinking activities, I try to give them the option of doing the work alone or with one or two other students. I might ask them to spend 15 minutes designing a brochure for a cruise. After comparing these I can easily extract the characteristics of the Romantic movement. The left-overs will ordinarily apply to the introduction of realism. If I ask them to identify the motives of a character in a story or play or to put themselves in the shoes of someone in the Renaissance, I ask the women to choose men and the men to choose women.

If I ask who their heroes and heroines are going back the last 25 years, I must be prepared to connect their answers to the lecture material. Or if I ask them to cast a film of a particular piece of literature, I must be informed on contemporary celebrities or adroit at finding out why they made the choices they did. This adds spontaneity to the class and prevents me from plodding boringly through lecture notes.

To accomplish the aim of involvement, it is necessary in all of these activities to be casual enough that students don't get a feeling there is a penalty attached. The attitude I would like to elicit is one of the fun of

participating. If they haven't paid attention, I would like them to feel some regret that they have missed the fun of participating.

Any activity designed for the end of the class period should be announced at the beginning if the purpose is to get attention. But to avoid falling into a routine which students can anticipate, I also have Before-and-After activities. For example, I carefully select a quotation which is somewhat enigmatic and tangential to the lecture material. I write it on the board just before class and ask for a paraphrase, a comment or a response about its perplexity--in writing. Then, five minutes before the end of class I go back to it and ask for a second, presumably more enlightened, response. I seldom take the time for sharing these aloud, although the students would like to. This would violate my criteria for economizing on time and for getting each individual engaged. Before-and-After activities make a vital point about attention-getting strategies: the element of surprise is necessary. If you do the expected, the students will tune out, space out , fantasize, and sleep with their eyes open as much as before.

The most difficult thing about doing these activities is the anguish at giving up precious class time needed to "cover the material." The time must be severely controlled and ideas simplified when they are too time-consuming.

The second most difficult thing was to convince myself that what I was doing was not silly--patronizing to the students and a little beneath my own dignity. Always the increased attention of the students convinced me that it was worthwhile. Test scores improved and attendance improved.